

«...It's nothing but torture»

It's time for a serious reaction to music torture

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Abstract

For years music has been used as a method of torture in American run prisons such as Bagram and Guantanamo. The American government calls it harsh interrogation and claim the music torture is kinder and less severe as it does not inflict physical damage on the prisoner.

It is not within our power to know whether death is worse a fate for humans than a life of trauma. Before we know this for certain, we cannot to claim that one fate is better or worse than the other.

Musicians have known for a long time that their music is used for torture, and yet there as been little to no reaction. As musicians and music lovers we cannot sit idly by while what is supposed to be a source of comfort and happiness, is used for such deplorable purpose. It is time for a serious reaction to music torture.

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Introduction

Music as a phenomenon is universal to all humans and can be found in every human culture past and present.¹ It has been used through history for pleasure, and for sorrow, in religion and everyday life alike. In our society today you can barely go through an entire day without hearing at least fragments of music.

Sadly, music is not only used for its intended purpose. Sound organised to make music is written to please the senses, but it can also have the exact opposite effect. If one listens to music continually over a long period of time, the mind grows tired. It is not healthy to be exposed to loud noise for too long, and for a long time music has been exploited for this exact purpose.

After the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York City on September 11th 2001, George W. Bush, president of the United States of America declared a global war on terror:

*“Our war on terror begins with (Terror group) Al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”*²

Three years later photos from an American run prison in Abu Ghraib in Iraq were leaked, showing the inhumane treatment of detainees. Even though America was one of the countries to sign the Universal declaration of Human Rights, where article 5 states that *“No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”*³, it is now known that The US utilises various interrogation techniques that narrowly bypass torture.⁴

“What we’re talking about here is people in a darkened room, physically inhibited by handcuffs, bags over their heads and music blaring at them. That is torture, That is nothing but torture. It doesn’t matter what the music is – it could be Tchaikovsky’s finest or it could be Barney the Dinosaur. It really doesn’t matter, it’s going to drive you completely nuts.”

¹ Josh McDermott and Marc Hauser, *The Origins of Music: Innateness, Uniqueness, and Evolution*. 03.10.05: 1
http://web.mit.edu/jhm/www/Pubs/McDermott_2005_music_evolution.pdf

² AP Archive. *President George W. Bush addresses a Joint Congress about the War on Terror*. filmed 20.09.01. Youtube video, 05:12. Posted 31.07.15.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vzRMaHCysU>

³ UN General Assembly, 1948. *Universal declaration of human rights*, article 5 (217 [III] A). Paris.

⁴ Natasha Lin, *De-trivialising Music Torture as Torture-lite* (master diss., University of Melbourne 2012): 1.

David Gray⁵ who is quoted above, is one of the musicians who has spoken up against his music being used to harsh interrogation. Shockingly few has followed his example, as most people find it hard to believe that music can be torturous. Understandable as that is seeing is as we grow up to connect music to good experiences, is it time to take the music back for its intended purposes?

Compared to other methods of torture, music might come off as quite light. It can be argued to being a better alternative. Through it, one can paint a future where interrogation is free of physical damage and pain, and by extension, casualty free conflicts, but is it reasonable?

This thesis will look closer on the pros and cons of music as a method of torture, through the song Bodies by American metal band Drowning Pool. The song is notorious in it's connection not only with American run prison Guantanamo, but also in the war on Iraq, as well as being connected to Mass shootings in America. The band's commentary will play a crucial role as well as other musician's reaction and accounts from former detainees in American run prisons.

Music and torture

Music is perhaps not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of torture. Most people will imagine physical abuse and inhumane conditions. Loud noises over a long period of time can nevertheless have severe consequences.

Audiologists agree that being exposed to 85 db of noise for eight hours a day is hazardous.⁶ In dark prisons and in Guantanamo, former detainees claim to have been exposed to loud noise and music for twelve hours or more each day. The noise was so loud that guards stationed in each end of corridors had to shout or walk up to one another to be able to hear each other.⁷

⁵ *A Reprieve Project: Zero dB Reprieve*, last modified 10.12.08, https://reprieve.org.uk/press/2008_12_10zerodbpressrelease/

⁶ Eileen Daniel, *Noise and Hearing Loss: A Review*. May 2007: 1.

⁷ Suzanne Cusick, *Out of This World*. 25.01.08: 21

The experimenting with music as a method to interrogate prisoners in America originates from The Cold War, 1947-1991⁸. American, Canadian and British governments funded a lot of research into the psychological effects of “harsh interrogation” techniques. Although these techniques, in America consolidated in a document called KUBARK, were banned by the American government after the Vietnam War, evidence has been found that these methods are still taught to US personnel.⁹

Former detainees in American run prisons have described how they were cuffed and got earphones on their head to block out any sound. Some also remember having sacks pulled over their heads or blacked out goggles over their eyes to obscure their vision. Music could be played for days. Detainees were put in small, dark rooms, and forced into stress positions while loud music were played from speakers in the corners.

Playing loud music for prisoners is used to dislocate and isolate them. Humans depend a lot upon their sense of hearing and seeing, and when they are taken away, stress and panic takes over. Especially if the music is blared at the prisoner straight after they are captured, the shock of capture experience is prolonged and intensified.¹⁰

Moazzam Begg was a prisoner in Guantanamo from 2002 to 2005. When asked to describe how it feels to have loud music playing constantly, he says: *“If you can't hear yourself think, you can't think. If you can't think, then you have no control of your senses. If you have no control of your senses, you are for all intents and purposes a completely vegetated person.”*¹¹

For prisoners of Muslim faith, Western music also have the effect of distressing the prisoner. In a log of a Guantanamo detainee Muhammad Al-Qatani, it is revealed that the interrogators made him listen to music like Christina Aguilera, and other genres of music that would stop him from performing the practices of a “good muslim man”.¹²

⁸ ⁸ Natasha Lin, *De-trivialising Music Torture as Torture-lite*. (master diss., University of Melbourne 2012): 9.

⁹ Suzanne Cusick, *Out of This World*. 25.01.08: 3

¹⁰ Christopher Cerf, *Songs of War*. Documentary. Directed by Tristan Chytroschek. Doha: Al-Jazeera, 2010.

¹¹ Christopher Cerf, *Songs of War*. Documentary. Directed by Tristan Chytroschek. Doha: Al-Jazeera, 2010.

¹² Suzanne Cusick, *Out of This World*. 25.01.08: 12

However the true purpose of music torture, as with most other methods, is the relief when the music stops and they are released from their torment. The detainee will feel dependency on their interrogator in these situations and are more likely to speak to said person. According to former U.S. army interrogator Mike Ritz, this is the best way to get to the truth.¹³

In America, music torture is not referred to as torture, but an enhanced interrogation method. Like non-lethal weapons, it is viewed as a method that does not cause physical harm or as far as we know, no long-term psychological damage. This causes in many cases a trivialisation of music torture. One to use more freely and frequently because the risk of damage is less likely.

Some scholars beg to differ. In his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali puts it like this:

*“In its biological reality, noise is a source of pain. Beyond a certain limit, it becomes an immaterial weapon of death. The ear, which transforms sound signals into electric impulses addressed to the brain, can be damaged, and even destroyed, when the frequency of a sound exceeds 20,000 hertz, or when its intensity exceeds 80 decibels. Diminished intellectual capacity, accelerated respiration and heartbeat, hypertension, slowed digestion, neurosis, altered diction: these are the consequences of excessive sound in the environment.”*¹⁴

However, it is not just music on its own that makes the experience unbearable for the prisoner. Musicologist Suzanne G. Cusick is one of the people who stress the fact that it is the combination of stress positions, the feeling of utter powerlessness, fatigue and humiliation, on top of the exposure to incessant, loud music that takes the experience from annoying and uncomfortable, to a level of torture.

¹³ Christopher Cerf, *Songs of War*. Documentary. Directed by Tristan Chytroschek. Doha: Al-Jazeera, 2010.

¹⁴ Jacques Attali, trans. Brian Massumi, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1977.

The song *Bodies. Drowning Pool's* and other's reaction

The song *Bodies* was the single off of *Sinner*, *Drowning Pool's* album from 2001. According to the band, the lyrics are a celebration of the brotherhood of the moshpit, an area during a concert where the audience dance in a violent and frantic manner.¹⁵

Despite the intended message from the band, the somewhat violent lyrics in the song, especially the opening line *Let the Bodies Hit the Floor*, has led to the song being linked to a number of violent incidents.

Aside from being one of the more frequently used songs for music torture in Guantanamo, *Bodies* is a popular song amongst American soldiers on stationed abroad. Before going on missions or into conflict areas, soldiers listen to music to rile themselves up and get into the right headspace for the extreme amount of concentration required.

When asked what they listen to, a lot of the men stationed in Iraq named *Bodies* by *Drowning Pool* as a favourite. Some of them even talked about blasting the music out on loudspeakers from their vehicles, to either share the music with their fellow countrymen or to try to scare of the enemy.¹⁶

This is not the first time music from loudspeakers have been tried as a way of scaring off the enemy during war. During the Vietnam war from 1955 to 1975, American forces experimented with the use of sound and music as a weapon.

Project Wandering Soul was based on the Buddhist way of life in Vietnam. The Vietnamese worship they ancestors, and believed souls to wander the earth if they died too far from home. By using large speakers attached to vehicles and helicopters, the Americans would fill the Vietnamese jungle with ghostlike sounds, telling the Vietcong to stop messing with the people's right to live freely, or the people would disown them.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Definition of moshpit.* collins dictionary,
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mosh-pit>

¹⁶ Christopher Cerf. *Songs of War*. Documentary. Directed by Tristan Chytroschek. Doha: Al-Jazeera, 2010.

¹⁷ Steve Goodman *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. Massachusetts: MIT press 2010

Whether these noisy weapons have any effect to speak of, is unclear. Regardless, it is not a frequently used method, so the US army must generally think of it as a waste of time and resources.

Drowning Pool's reaction

In 2012 musician and composer for the children's TV program Sesame Street, Christopher Cerf, went on a mission to find out more about his music being used for torture in Guantanamo. In the documentary *Songs of War*, Cerf interviews former detainees and prison guards in Guantanamo, as well as the band Drowning Pool to ask if they had any comments about their music being used for torture as well.

While the band was happy to discuss their how their music was popular among soldiers stationed abroad to keep their spirits high, Cerf is nearly turned away from talking to them when he wants to discuss Guantanamo.

Despite the band's publicist giving Cerf explicit orders not to mention Guantanamo, he asks Drowning Pool what their thoughts are. They seem uncomfortable at first, before joking the whole subject away, saying they put their audience through that kind of torture every night.

This is a stark contrast to the passion they use to describe their song *Bodies* being played by soldiers in Iraq:

*"No one wants to think of their music being the soundtrack to death (..) But if cranking our songs up, keeps you alert and gets you back done from your mission and thus get you back home to your family, then by all means blast that thing."*¹⁸

Others have a different reaction

Drowning Pool's reaction to their music being used for torture is very different from Christopher Cerf's own reaction to his music being used to torture prisoners.

"My first reaction was, this can't possibly be true. This is just too crazy, and it was absurd. But of course I didn't really like the idea that I was helping break down prisoners, but it was much worse

¹⁸ Christopher Cerf. *Songs of War*. Documentary. Directed by Tristan Chytroschek. Doha: Al-Jazeera, 2010.

when I heard later that they were actually using the music in Guantanamo to actually do deep, long term interrogation. And obviously to inflict enough pain on prisoner so they would talk."¹⁹

He is not the only one. In 2008 musicians such as Matthew Herbert, David Gray and Tom Morello joined forces with Reprieve, a human rights organisation, to protest the use of music as torture. They formed Zero Decibel, a project for British musicians whose music is used for interrogation.

Matthew Herbert said: "*The use of music as torture is a deplorable new twist in a world that seems deliberately deaf to the effects and injustices of abuse in captivity. This is why, along with others, I support Zero Decibel.*"²⁰

However, in the British documentary, *Crazy Rulers of the World*, Christopher Cerf has a very different reaction than in *Songs of War*. When the creator of the documentary contacts him, Cerf takes a page out of Drowning Pool's book and laughs the matter away. He says it would be a great double win if detainees would spill information while simultaneously learning numbers and letters.²¹

In the documentary, he seems in fact more concerned with the money he claims that the American government owes him for using his music, saying it is after all a sort of public performance.

He appears to be glad to serve his country through the use of his music in Guantanamo. After explaining how some of his songs don't have the desired learning effect the producers of Sesame Street is looking for, he speculates whether it might be useful for CIA as a brainwashing technique.

It seems to be hard for most people to react upon being told that music is used for torture. The artists themselves are not the only ones who are reluctant to take the issue seriously. Media also had a flippant attitude when the news of music being used as torture became known. The St. Petersburg

¹⁹ Christopher Cerf. *Songs of War*. Documentary. Directed by Tristan Chytroschek. Doha: Al-Jazeera, 2010.

²⁰ *A Reprieve Project: Zero dB*. Reprieve, last modified 10.12.08, https://reprieve.org.uk/press/2008_12_10zerodbpressrelease/

²¹ *Crazy Rulers of the World: Funny Torture*. Documentary. Directed by Jon Johnson. London: Picador, 2004.

Times in Tampa Bay asked their readers what music they would use to “drive the insurgents out of Fallujah, break down Iraqi prisoners or just drive their neighbors nuts”.²²

Musician and music therapist Natasha Lin find reactions like the one Drowning Pool has to their music being used as torture, very concerning. In her master thesis on music as torture, she writes: “The lack of concern on music torture is not limited to newspapers and television shows. Some artists were also amused when it was made known to them that their music was used as part of US psychological operations method.”²³

It is through the enlightenment of people in what happens in prisons like Guantanamo that we can start taking the issue of music as torture seriously. So, what does happen in Guantanamo? Most of what is going on in Guantanamo is classified and not open to the public. There are those who do speak about their experiences however, even though they sign non-disclosure documents upon their release. These are vital for the spread of information necessary for change.

What happens in Guantanamo

Moazzam Begg was detained by the US government from 2002 to 2005. Donald Vance suffered the same fate for 97 days in 2006.²⁴ Both men, like all prisoners detained by the US government, signed a nondisclosure agreement when they were released. However, they have both spoken out about their treatment while being imprisoned. Both hoping that the public profile they gain from speaking up is enough to protect them from future detention.

When Christopher Cerf meet with Moazzam Begg in the documentary *Songs of War*, Begg describes: “The treatment in Guantanamo (compared to Bagram) was more tortuous than torturous. Nonetheless extended periods of isolation are what destroy people’s minds. There have been of course, deaths in Guantanamo. People still maintain what’s happening to people over there is a form of torture, but it is not the physical type of torture that we had in Bagram.”

²² Natasha Lin. *De-trivialising Music Torture as Torture-lite* (master diss., University of Melbourne 2012): 31

²³ Natasha Lin. *De-trivialising Music Torture as Torture-lite* (master diss., University of Melbourne 2012): 32

²⁴ Suzanne Cusick. *Out of This World*. 25.01.08: 5 and 20

When Cusick talked to Begg for her paper, *“You are in a place that is out of the world. . .”*: *Music in the Detention Camps of the “Global War on Terror”* in 2007, he recounts his experience of being detained in Bagram:

“(...) Constantly playing ear-splitting heavy metal tracks by Marilyn Manson to break down new detainees. Once they even played the Bee Gees Saturday Night Fever soundtrack all night long. ‘Hardly,’ I thought, ‘enough to break anyone I knew.’

Many of the soldiers, being from the South, liked listening to country and western music, which most detainees regarded the same as all other “English” music. But I had the misfortune of knowing better.

‘We’ll talk. We’ll all talk,’ I said in half jest when they played it, ‘just turn that crap off please!’”²⁵

Donald Vance was an unpaid informant to the United States of America, stationed in Iraq in 2006. While he was investigating an Iraqi security firm for illegal arms trade, the firm was raided by American troops and Vance was arrested as a suspect. For three months he was detained in Camp Cropper in Bagdad.²⁶

“I actually can’t remember a single day in which I wasn’t subjected to music. . . . Large speakers [were] placed within the entryways to passages to either side of the structure. This is done so both sides of the building are hearing the same songs. . . . From my cell to the nearest speakers was approximately 20 yards. (...) Songs would ‘jump,’ I would hear a hard rock song then I would have to hear a Country song then a hard rock song, then maybe a Hip-Hop song. . . . The music was very loud.”²⁷

People listen to music every day, and that might be why it is hard to understand how it can be used for torture. What is important to keep in mind, is that there is more to it than just the music. By examining the factors that make up music torture, we can easier understand what it is that makes it so unbearable.

²⁵ Suzanne Cusick *Out of This World*. 25.01.08: 6

²⁶ Suzanne Cusick. *Out of This World*. 25.01.08: 20

²⁷ Suzanne Cusick. *Out of This World*. 25.01.08: 21

Discussion- Time to react

Is it torture?

The amount of research on music's effect on the human brain and senses is vast, but focuses mostly on the positive effects in terms of mental health, mood and memory. With most researches agreeing that music does in fact a positive effect on the mind, it's not too far a reach to assume then, that the same can be said about the negative consequences.

Upon examining the articles used in this thesis, it is safe to say that these scholars agree that music is indeed torture. Not only can it be hazardous for ones hearing, but it can also have consequences on the brain.

Professor for Human Rights and literature at Bard University in New York, Thomas Keenan puts it like this: *"Torture and music have long been connected and nothing in the history or nature of music prevents it from being put to terrible uses due to its very force of its capacity to transport our thoughts and move our feelings makes it a perfect instrument for sensory deprivation, madness, or worse."*²⁸

Torture as a concept is an abominable practice that serves little to no purpose. There is evidence that torture does not work as a tool to find out the truth. Pain, fear and stress undermine the brain's executive functions, including recall and cognition, making memory fallible, and pushing individuals into confabulation that they may actually believe.²⁹

As presented by the detainees quoted in this paper, music and loud noises can in fact have a long-term effect if used to carelessly. It affects the brain's ability to produce coherent thoughts, and in the long term, drive people mad.

Compared to other methods of torture, loud music may be more light, but any form of forceful coercion is in fact illegal by international law.

The document from the Geneva Conventions set down in 1949 was reinforced in 1984 to state in article 17 that:

²⁸ Natasha Lin. *De-trivialising Music Torture as Torture-lite* (master diss., University of Melbourne 2012): 11

²⁹ Mary Lowth. *Does Torture Work?* 30.10.17: 126

*“No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind.”*³⁰

What do we do now?

Music used for destructive purposes is not a new phenomenon. In Aztec culture, death whistles emitting a screeching sound, was used to intimidate the enemy in war, and in the 70’s the IRA used loud rock music to sleep-deprive British prisoners.³¹

Furthermore, torture predates the use of music for interrogation by far, is unlikely to disappear completely even when abolished. In the documentaries *Crazy Rulers of the World* and *Songs of War*, we meet only a handful of the people who stand in the way of this happening.

With this in mind, torture by music, which affects the mind rather than the body, might seem like a better option. This however, is to assume that death and physical pain the the worst fate humans can experience. We don’t know this for sure, and until we do, we cannot fool ourselves into thinking that life with mental issues and trauma is a better alternative to death.

That torture is even used in a world where we believe we have come further than that, with all our treaties and cooperation between states, is difficult to acknowledge. It can be assumed that this is the reason why people react with jokes when they hear music is used for torture. Because they don’t know how to react. Words as pure and beautiful is often used to describe music, and it is hard to picture something pure being used for evil.

Even though it is tempting to imagine that one day we will live in a world where conflict is casualty free, it is more likely that music torture and non-lethal weapons will only be an addition to the already abundant arsenal of weaponry warring states possess.

³⁰ *Third Geneva Convention*. 1949. Prisoners of War, article 3. Geneva.

³¹ Justin Caba. *Torture Methods With Sound: How Pure Noise Can Be Used To Break You Psychologically*. Medical Daily, 20.01.15.
<https://www.medicaldaily.com/torture-methods-sound-how-pure-noise-can-be-used-break-you-psychologically-318638>

When we look to the future, we must not forget our past. It is through unwavering belief in our ability to do better that we will move forward. It is the job of musicians and music lovers alike to ensure that music is taken back from the game of politicians, and again reserved for its maker's intended purpose.

Final Word

I first heard about music and torture in 2016. Our Music history and analysis professor at the Conservatory of Music in Tromsø brought the article "You are in a place that is out of the world. . .": Music in the Detention Camps of the "Global War on Terror" by Suzanne G. Cusick for us to discuss in class. I remember how shocked I was upon seeing how unfazed my fellow students seemed by the subject, whereas I was completely appalled.

Doing the research for this paper has been difficult. Watching people recount their experience in prison where they were abused and tortured, made the process go slower than I initially thought. It was my passion for this cause that kept me going, and now that I am finishing up, I look back on my work with pride. I have grown as a person with this newly obtained knowledge, and it has planted the seed of ambition to go further with my research.

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